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AUTHOR Fage, Judith
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ABSTRACT

In September 1986, a survey was begun to determine the amount and type of provision of vocational guidance in distance adult and higher education outside the United Kingdom. The researcher wrote to 176 institutions provided from the database of the Open University's International Centre for Distance Learning and to 7 African institutions not listed on the database, requesting information and views on any vocational guidance offered to their distance students. One year after the initial letter was sent, 60 responses had been received. The results of the survey showed that there is a wide variation in the provision of vocational guidance from institution to institution. The full range of vocational guidance methods was found across the spectrum. However, the problem remains that workshops tend to be inaccessible to distance students and inadequate for the more heterogeneous needs of adults. Strategies adopted to overcome the barriers of access to career services experienced by distance students included self-directed career planning materials; provision of space and resources for vocational guidance at on-campus residential schools in the distance teaching program; arrangements for distance students to telephone on-campus advisors toll free; advisors based at local centers; and use of present and past students in resource networks. The wide variation in the provision of services seemed to reflect the varying perception of need and the availability of financial resources. (KC)

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Vocational Guidance Provision for Distance Students in Higher
Education - some findings from an international survey

Judith Fage, Senior Counsellor, Open University, London Region

In September 1986 I initiated a simple international survey of provision of vocational guidance in distance adult and higher education outside the U.K. (I use the phrase 'vocational guidance' to encompass the range of information, advice and counselling available to students, relating to their choice of occupation and its educational implications). My interest stemmed from my involvement in the British Open University's vocational guidance provision: a combination of careers information booklets, workshops, written advice and referral, personal telephone counselling and computer-assisted guidance. (1) I wrote to 176 institutions provided from the database of the OU's International Centre for Distance Learning, requesting information and views on any vocational guidance offered to their distance students; and to 7 African institutions not listed on the ICDL database. One year after my initial letter, 60 responses have been received.

The ICDL identifies three types of institution offering distance higher education: purely distance teaching institutions (Type A); conventional institutions with a distance teaching department (Type B); and conventional institutions which are developing a distance teaching programme (Type C). It was not possible to distinguish the age range of students within these institutions from the ICDL's listings, though the specific situation of adult students, who formed a high proportion of students in many institutions, was referred to frequently in their responses.

Responses from geographical areas by institution type were as follows (total numbers written in brackets):

	<u>Africa</u>	<u>Asia</u>	<u>Australasia</u>	<u>Europe</u>
Type A	2	5 (13)	2 (2)	2 (6)
Type B		5 (19)	11 (18)	1 (6)
Type C		0 (6)	5 (7)	5 (8)
	<u>North America</u>	<u>Central & South America</u>	<u>Middle East</u>	
Type A	1 (15)	0 (1)	0 (1)	
Type B	14 (45)	1 (3)	0 (0)	
Type C	5 (20)	1 (5)	0 (1)	

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Clearly a response rate of 33%, from a list not itself complete, must leave some important gaps. Nevertheless these 60 institutions provide an interesting range of models of vocational guidance for distance students.

The Range of Provision

The sharpest difference lay between Type A institutions, and Types B and C, which had in many cases an established on-campus counselling or careers centre already serving its younger, full-time students, providing a working base for a service to off-campus students. As a result only 9 of these out of 48 appeared to offer no specific vocational guidance at all, compared with 8 out of the 12 purely distance institutions, which also often suffered from being more recently established. The provision for distance students in institution types B and C depended largely on two factors: how well-resourced and well-developed the existing on-campus service was; and how accessible to off-campus students.

As one might expect there was a slight tendency for type B institutions to have a clearer perception of the needs of distance students and to have adapted provision for them.

Overall the range of provision was extremely wide. Only 20 out of the 60 employed specialist careers advisers. Some offered no provision at all; sometimes because of the political context:

'Firms lay claim to their employees' work both during their education and after graduation. So there is no need for vocational guidance.'

'The need for counselling is extreme, but the government would look upon it as an unwarrantable expense, and the first steps towards "welfarism" '.

Another group of low providers referred all students to state careers services which they believed to be adequate, especially for students mainly in employment.

Sometimes financial constraints limited provision severely:

'There is me plus a secretary versus 12,000 students. We can offer therefore, no special services to anybody - we help as much as we can those who walk through the door. We have no computer gadgetry and no budget'.

In some cases the geographical spread was so great, or employment patterns so variable, or so unrelated to the western industrialised model, that a centralised service geared to this model was inappropriate.

The largest group comprised institutions which provided an on-campus service which was available to adult, external students but which made no special effort to attract them or provide access. These tended to experience a low level of use by distance students, which reinforced the view that there was a low level of need. Those which attempted to extend their services, sometimes simply by better advertising, reported greater usage. These institutions also tended to have a larger professional and support staff and a budget which allowed a reasonable level of counselling and publication. But all these factors interweave: an institution with a strong commitment both to its adult and distance students and to counselling is likely to allocate more resources and employ more specialist staff.

Means and Methods

The full range of vocational guidance methods was found across the spectrum, in particular information leaflets and personal counselling, either face-to-face or, especially with distance students, by telephone. Some institutions ran workshops, mostly at the initial career planning stage. Surprisingly, perhaps, only four used computer-assisted vocational guidance (CAVG), all United States universities. The dilemma was put thus:

'In North America right now, the 'advising' model of career counselling has been supplanted by a more experiential group model or by computerized testing, information and self-assessment computer services. Since the latter are extremely expensive for our very tight university budgets, our career counsellors have developed group workshops for most career counselling services'.

The problem remains, however, that workshops tend to be inaccessible to distance students, and inadequate without personal support counselling for the more heterogeneous needs of adults.

Special Provision for Distance Students

Strategies adopted to overcome the barriers of access to careers services experienced by distance students included:

- Self-directed career planning materials, ranging from self-scoring questionnaires, through more substantial workbooks, to courses or modules of courses.
- Timetabling space and providing resources for vocational guidance at on-campus residential schools in the distance teaching programme, or at special day schools or evening classes.

- Arrangements for distance students to telephone on-campus advisers on a 'tollfree' telephone line for the cost of a local call.
- Television, radio and student magazines to share information.
- Personal referral to local agencies, libraries, schools.
- Advisers based at local centres.
- Outreach work, both to adults generally in the wider community, including part-time and distance students, and by visits to outlying university centres.
- Adaptation of career planning and job research workshops to a weekend format at local centres.
- Use of postgraduate students as support careers advisers working to a specialist, to expand resources.
- Use of present and past distance students as part of a resource network.

The Need for Provision.

The wide variation in provision found in the survey stemmed from a range of factors - political, economic and social context, resources, age of institution. Much of it, however, seemed to be due to the perception of need. This perception was related to two main factors, encapsulated in this letter:

'We have no careers guidance in our Institute. The main reason for that is the government maintains careers guidance offices open to all who might need it. The other reason is that nearly all of our students are already employed and study with us in their leisure time'.

Several institutions referred to the availability of external provision, especially in Scandinavian countries, which run nationwide employment agencies, and in Australia, where the Commonwealth Employment Services operate. How appropriate these state services are for adult undergraduates and graduates is not clear: while some institutions expressed confidence in them, others suggested that they may have limitations. One university described a collaborative system involving personal referral to external agencies, after initial counselling by the academic institution.

Even more important was the belief, articulated in several responses, that part-time students, mainly employed already, or caring for children, are not looking for work or career change. In some institutions offering specific professional updating courses this was

clearly the case. However, where undergraduate programmes were offered, others saw adult distance students as 'probably involved in, or anticipating, a career change' and of 'housewives' as 'the group most interested in gaining ideas of future paid employment'. My own survey of London students in 1986 tends to confirm this view: out of 722 students responding, 662 were in work or caring for children; but 339 were studying with a view to getting a job or changing career. (2)

Some institutions identified pre-course vocational guidance as especially important: 'We could do much more in this field, with a view to ensuring that students enrol on the right course for them, and thereby reducing the dropout rate'; one provided special career programmes for entrants, especially single parents and homemakers.

Changes in the world economy have, in addition, increased the need:

'Up until the last 10 years the state has enjoyed, for the most part, full employment. However, in more recent times we have suffered an unemployment rate of 8% and there is no immediate likelihood of the situation changing dramatically. It is my impression that as a result of the competitive employment market, students are considering their careers more seriously'.

Future Developments

It seems likely that the future will see a growing need for vocational guidance amongst non-traditional students in higher education, in a climate of, on the one hand, personal change and enhanced expectations based on their new educational experience and qualifications, and on the other economic and social change leading to fewer and different employment opportunities. Whether the need will be met is less clear, judging by the responses from this small survey. Commitment to guidance and counselling generally is variable; budgets are uncertain; impartial student-focussed vocational guidance, rather than employer control or abandoned self-help, is often seen as an expensive luxury, particularly for adults. Development of computer-assisted guidance seems frustratingly slow, and implementation is expensive. Nevertheless, the potential, the expertise and the need are there; and the beneficial effect of clear motivation on dropout (3) may prompt a readjustment of priorities in favour of vocational guidance for the growing number of part-time, distance-learning, adult students.

Notes

1. Details of this provision can be found in 'Vocational Guidance in the Open University' by Jenny Pulsford, in the published papers for the 1983 International Workshop on Counselling in Distance Education.
2. This confirms a trend reported in the 1985 survey of Open University graduates (Alan Woodley, Open University Institute of Educational Technology), of which 4 out of 10 reported a change of occupation; and a survey from Deakin University which showed that 85% of the 55 off-campus humanities graduates in 1984/5, average age 41, were committed to career change or improvement.
3. This view is supported by Richard Siaciwena, in his paper 'Counselling and Support Services for Distance Learners at the University of Zambia', also for the 1983 Workshop.